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### **Nigeria Languages: Failing Health and Possible Healing**

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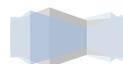
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#### **Abstract**

*The expressions “self actualization,” “autonomy,” and “autonomous community” have now become descriptive staples of what various communities in Nigeria are struggling for, especially the ethnic minorities. Along with these are the words “crisis” (as in the Niger Delta region), “religious crisis,” “hostage taking,” and “kidnapping.” Whichever form it takes, a common denominator is the demarcation along the lines of ethnicity expressed in language dichotomy. Indeed the “we”/“us” versus “they”/“them” language has been repeatedly used by politicians and those seeking political recognition or power. This paper seeks to show by means of evidence from the linguistic field, that even as many Nigerians identify with their individual language groups and are willing to support it (sometimes even by violent or other unconstitutional means), the languages themselves are sick, and many are in the process of dying. It presents results of research in the field that gives an insight into just how endangered our indigenous languages are, including two of the so-called big three. It suggests that policy makers should pay more than lip-service to mother-tongue literacy, and that politicians should re-channel their energies to developing these languages instead of exploiting ethnic differences for selfish political ends. It*



*advocates a re-focusing of the patrilineal zest in order to preserve, protect, and transform Nigerian languages, thus preserving these vital aspects of our cultural identity.*

### Introduction

Language in the context of this paper specifically refers to the mother tongue. And Nigerian language refers, not to all languages used or spoken in Nigeria, but those indigenous to Nigerians only. Sometimes the term mother tongue or mother language is used for the language that a person acquires at home (usually from his parents). Children growing up in bilingual homes can according to this definition have more than one mother tongue. For instance, Statistics Canada, a body that worked on the censuses conducted on the Canadian population, defines mother tongue as "the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood by the individual at the time of the census"

(<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/Products/Reference/dict/pop082.htm>, retrieved January 24, 2008). It has been suggested that Mother in this context of 'mother tongue' probably originated from the definition of mother as source, or origin; as in mother-country or land.

In some countries such as Kenya, India and Nigeria, "mother tongue" is sometimes used to indicate the language of one's ethnic group (ethnic tongue), in both common and journalistic parlance (e.g. 'I have no apologies for not learning my mother tongue'), rather than one's first language ([http://www.nationmedia.com/dailynation/nmgcontententry.asp?category\\_id=25&newsid=82793](http://www.nationmedia.com/dailynation/nmgcontententry.asp?category_id=25&newsid=82793), retrieved January 26, 2008).

A similar usage of the term was employed in Ireland in the early-to mid-twentieth century, with Irish being referred to as the "mother tongue" of all Irish people, even of those whose first language was English. Also in Singapore, "mother tongue" refers to the language of one's ethnic group regardless of actual proficiency, while the "first language" refers to the English language, which is the lingua franca for most post-independence Singaporeans due to its use as the language of instruction in government schools and as a working language despite it not being a native tongue for most Singaporeans. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_language), retrieved January 24, 2008).

So in this paper, the term 'mother tongue' is to be understood in this sense of being the 'language of one's ethnic group (or ethnic tongue).



### The Need for the Present Study

According to Okedera and Okedera (1992)

. . . the initial, or mother- tongue, language appears to be the best medium for literacy, for psychological, educational, and sociological reasons. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that works most automatically in one's mind for the expression and understanding of facts. Educationally, one learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium.' Sociologically, it is a means of identification among members of the community to which one belongs; the language of a community is also the most potent symbolic representation of its culture (91-102).

Several issues emerge from this comment. The first is that the mother tongue appears to be the best medium for literacy, especially at the introductory stage of a child's development. The mother tongue medium in education was the case in the introductory classes in many primary schools. However, over 200 primary and secondary school teachers from various parts of the country who were interviewed during the B.ED Part Time programme (in October 2007) showed that in most schools, the medium of instruction from the kindergarten is now English, even though it seems that the National Policy on basic education still requires that the first years of a child's education be conducted in the mother tongue or the dominant indigenous language of the area. Whether and to what extent this has impacted on the diminishing standard of education in Nigeria can form the subject of another study.

Of immediate concern to us in this paper is the fact that the mother tongue language "is a means of identification among members of the community to which one belongs; the language of a community is also the most potent symbolic representation of its culture" (102). The agitation from various ethnic groups in the country no doubt validate the claim that (a) mother tongue is a means of identification among members of the community to which one belongs, and (b) it is the most potent symbolic representation of its culture. Furthermore, whereas Okedera and Okedera identified the constraints of contemporary language literacy in Nigeria to include the lack of orthography for a large proportion of Nigerian languages and called on the Federal Government of Nigeria to direct its efforts to developing orthography



and literature in many unwritten indigenous languages, the results of our search show that even in some of the so-called major Nigerian languages such as Igbo and Yoruba—languages with fully developed orthographies and an abundant supply of literature—there still exist among its native speakers symptoms of ill-health that may lead to eventual attrition or worse.

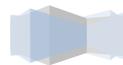
Cummins (2000) raises another issue that supports the research findings of Okedera and Okedera. He identifies what he calls “assimilationist policies in education [which] discourage students from maintaining their mother tongues.” According to these policies, if students retain their culture and language, then they are viewed as less capable of identifying with the mainstream culture and learning the mainstream language of the society. One manifestation of the assimilationist policy is seen when students are physically (or by other means) punished for speaking their mother tongue in the school. But whether physical punishment is administered or not, a strong message is communicated to them: that if they want to be accepted by the teacher and the society, they have to renounce any allegiance to their home language and culture.

### **Methodology**

A questionnaire was drawn up and administered to 200 respondents within the Jos metropolis including the University of Jos community. Two broad classifications were made. The first group was those with Post-Basic Education (PBE). 98% of respondents in this group consisted of university undergraduates at 300 Level in the Department of English of the University of Jos. The objective was to determine whether Nigerians who were exposed to formal education at this level would demonstrate competence in their mother tongue. The remaining 2% in this group were Youth Corp members, higher education graduates.

The second group consisted of respondents with only basic formal education or no formal education at all. Respondents in this group were waiters, bartenders, motor mechanics, house helps, and artisans of various kinds. It was hoped that this would serve as the control group. In other words, if higher formal education has any corroding influence on the level of mother tongue competence, those not exposed to that level of formal education should demonstrate a higher competence in their mother tongue.

Other variables in the questionnaire included: age, sex, place of birth, place of upbringing and the ethnic group of parents. The age range of the



respondents is 18-45 for those with post basic education, and 17-35 for the group lacking post basic education. The age variable was introduced to determine to what extent the mother tongue competence or diminishing competence could be said to be a generational trait. It is also based on the submission (Dalby 2002) that language attrition and language death take time and may be barely discernible within a generation.

It was also felt that the micro and macro linguistic environment of respondents would influence their level of mother tongue competence. Consequently, the questionnaire required responses about the respondents' place of birth as well as place of upbringing.

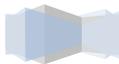
Another critical factor covered in the questionnaire was the ethnic tongue of the parents of respondents. The hypothesis was that children whose parents spoke the same ethnic tongue would be more likely to acquire competence in that tongue than those whose father and mother belonged to different ethnic groups. Gender was added to the questionnaire just in case it threw light on whether male or female respondents in similar circumstances had a tendency to acquire higher or lower mother tongue competence. This aspect is not central to our discussion.

The data from the questionnaire was analysed using statistical computations, and frequency tables were drawn on the different variables to determine the frequencies of occurrence of the different indices.

### **Multitudinous, Dwindling Nigerian Voices**

According to [mapsofworld.com](http://mapsofworld.com), an internet source, there are more than 500 indigenous Nigerian languages, although English is the official language of Nigeria. [OnlineNigeria.com](http://OnlineNigeria.com), another internet source, is more specific, listing the number as 521. Of these, says this source, 510 are living languages, 2 are second without mother-tongue speakers, and 9 are extinct. Prominent Nigerian languages are the ones called large languages or major languages: Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Fulfulde, or Kanuri (Ethnologue, Grimes ed. 1996; Crozier & Blench, 1992; Gordon, Raymond G. Jr. ed., 2005). The rest are classed as minority languages with only a small number of speakers. Some of these have developed orthographies and written traditions, but most are pre-literate until now.

Taking a cursory look at the so-called major languages, it might appear that they are in good health and are, in fact thriving. From that perspective, it

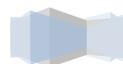


would appear that if anything is to be said about Nigerian languages on the danger list of extinction, it would be only with respect to the over 500 minority languages. However, as Munzali Jibril (2008) pointed out recently, “already some minor languages have been engulfed by their immediate major languages . . . the three major languages in the country - Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo - are not spared from the wave of extinction as . . . they will also disappear in the next 100 years.” One implication of this forecast is that the symptoms of dying languages may not become immediately apparent.

But, following the diagnostic criteria provided by McWhorter (2001), it is possible to identify a sick or dying language. According to these criteria, dying languages’ vocabularies are constricted, with many single words pinch-hitting for concepts that were expressed by several more specific ones in the living language. Furthermore, dying languages are marked by a tendency to let drop (or to strip away) many accreted “frills” languages drift into developing through time. One such “frill” in a language is the inflectional prefix or suffix, which quite a few languages do without. Thus, speakers of a dying inflected language often avoid using inflections in favour of more immediately transparent constructions, thus creating a somewhat pidginized form. The data that follows shows that apart from Hausa, other Nigerian languages (including Igbo and Yoruba) are at various stages of ill-health. The extent of the illness of individual languages may still need to be determined by another research. This paper only provides evidence of such illness and calls for steps to be taken to halt, if possible, their eventual death.

### **The Data**

It is difficult to gauge the health of a language, chiefly because mutations are slow and may span a man’s life-time. Yet, there are indices that can help in the diagnosis of the viability or vitality of languages. Below is a summary of some of the indices of relevant variables from the questionnaire and their frequencies.



Respondents with Post Basic Education

Vs

Respondents with Basic or No Formal Education

Table 1A: Sex and Age of respondents with post basic education

		Sex		
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	1.0	1.0	1.0
Male	45	43.3	43.3	44.2
Female	58	55.8	55.8	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

		Age		
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 18	1	1.0	1.0	1.0
19	2	1.9	1.9	2.9
20	9	8.7	8.7	11.5
21	12	11.5	11.5	23.1
22	20	19.2	19.2	42.3
23	10	9.6	9.6	51.9
24	13	12.5	12.5	64.4
25	9	8.7	8.7	73.1
26	7	6.7	6.7	79.8
27	4	3.8	3.8	83.7
28	4	3.8	3.8	87.5
29	3	2.9	2.9	90.4
30	2	1.9	1.9	92.3
31	2	1.9	1.9	94.2
32	1	1.0	1.0	95.2
33	1	1.0	1.0	96.2
39	1	1.0	1.0	97.1
40	2	1.9	1.9	99.0
45	1	1.0	1.0	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	

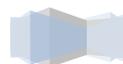


Table 1A shows that this group has a higher percentage of females, 55.8%; age range of respondents 18-45, with the larger population between 18-31 years

Table 1B: Sex and Age of respondents with basic or no formal education

		Sex			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	male	73	75.3	75.3	75.3
	female	24	24.7	24.7	100.0
	Total	97	100.0	100.0	

		Age			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	1	1.0	1.0	1.0
	18	3	3.1	3.1	4.1
	19	6	6.2	6.2	10.3
	20	4	4.1	4.1	14.4
	22	9	9.3	9.3	23.7
	23	4	4.1	4.1	27.7
	24	8	8.2	8.2	36.1
	25	12	12.4	12.4	48.5
	26	5	5.2	5.2	53.6
	27	10	10.3	10.3	63.9
	28	9	9.3	9.3	73.2
	29	6	6.2	6.2	79.4
	30	9	9.3	9.3	88.7
	31	4	4.1	4.1	92.8
	34	1	1.0	1.0	93.8
	35	6	6.2	6.2	100.0
Total		97	100.0	100.0	

Table 1B shows that this group has a higher percentage of males, 75.3%; age range of respondents 16-35 years

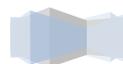


Table 2: Mother Tongue Competence

A

Group with Post Basic Education Who Could Speak Their Mother Tongue

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1	60	57.7	100.0	100.0
Missing System	44	42.3		
Total	104	100.0		

Group with Post Basic Education Who Could Read Their Mother Tongue

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1	18	17.3	100.0	100.0
Missing System	86	82.7		
Total	104	100.0		

Group with Post Basic Education Who Could Write Their Mother Tongue

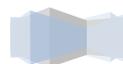
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1	11	10.6	100.0	100.0
Missing System	93	89.4		
Total	104	100.0		

Table 2A shows that in this group 57.7% speak, 17.3% could read, and 10.6% could write in their mother tongue

B

Group with Basic or no Formal Education Who Could Speak Their Mother Tongue

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1	69	71.1	100.0	100.0
Missing System	28	28.9		
Total	97	100.0		



Group with Basic or no Formal Education Who Could Read Their Mother Tongue

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1	30	30.9	100.0	100.0
Missing System	67	69.1		
Total	97	100.0		

Group with Basic or no Formal Education Who Could Write Their Mother Tongue

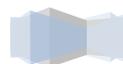
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1	28	28.9	100.0	100.0
Missing System	69	71.1		
Total	97	100.0		

Table 2B shows that in this group 71.1% could speak, 30.9% could read, and 28.9% could write in their mother tongue

Table 3: Competence in Additional Language(s) Apart From English and Mother Tongue

A Respondents with Post Basic Education

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	25	24.0	24.0	24.0
Berom	1	1.0	1.0	25.0
Hausa	70	67.3	67.3	92.3
Igbo	1	1.0	1.0	93.3
Ngas	1	1.0	1.0	94.2
Tiv	1	1.0	1.0	95.2
Urhobo	1	1.0	1.0	96.2
Yoruba	4	3.8	3.8	100.0
Total	104	100.0	100.0	



**B Respondents with Basic or no Formal Education**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	9	9.3	9.3	9.3
Emovoh	1	1.0	1.0	10.3
Fulani	1	1.0	1.0	11.3
Hausa	77	79.4	79.4	90.7
Idoma	1	1.0	1.0	91.8
Igala	1	1.0	1.0	92.8
Igbo	1	1.0	1.0	93.8
Miango	1	1.0	1.0	94.8
Tiv	2	2.1	2.1	96.9
Yoruba	3	3.1	3.1	100.0
Total	97	100.0	100.0	

Table 3A& B show that in both groups over 60% could speak, read write in Hausa, though the mother tongue data shows that less than 6% of respondents speak Hausa as their ethnic tongue

**Discussion**

A look at the data shows that respondents with post basic education spoke a total of 43 Nigerian tongues, while those with basic or no formal education spoke 36. A higher percentage of those with post basic education were females, accounting for 55.8 percent. On the other hand, respondents in the group with only basic or no formal education had a higher percentage of males, 75.3 percent.

**Summary of Mother Tongue Competence among Those with Post Basic Education**

57.7% spoke their mother tongue, the majority of them only fairly well, not fluently.

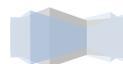
17.3% read in their mother tongue.

10.6% in addition to speaking and reading, also wrote in their mother tongue.

**Summary of Mother Tongue Competence among Those with Only Basic or no Formal Education**

71.1% spoke their mother tongue.

30.9% read in their mother tongue.



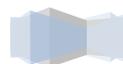
28.9% in addition to speaking and reading also wrote in their mother tongue.

As this summary shows, there is a higher level of mother tongue competence among those with little or no formal education, 71.1% in this group spoke their mother tongue, while only 57.7% of those with post basic education did so. Similarly, only 17.3% of those with post basic education read their mother tongue, whereas up to 30.9% of those without post basic education read their mother tongue. And, finally, as high as 28.9% of those with basic or no formal education wrote in their mother tongue, whereas only 10.6% of those with post basic education did so. The group with post basic education had a higher figure of females, 55.1%, but a lower level of mother tongue competence; only 17.3% read and 10.6% wrote their mother tongue. On the other hand, the group with basic or no formal education had a higher figure of males, 75.3%, and a higher level of mother tongue competence, 30.9% read and 28.9% wrote their mother tongue. However, it is not clear from the results whether gender is a contributing factor to the low level of mother tongue competence in the group with post basic education.

These results have implications for literacy in the country. For example, as Okedera and Okedera suggest, there is a need to clarify, in terms of policy, what it means to be literate locally, regionally, and nationally; because, as this micro study shows, there is a higher level of mother tongue literacy among those lacking formal education than may have been previously assumed.

The results of this study also further validate the claim about “killer languages” According to the Internet interactive encyclopaedia Wikipedia, “Today, the English language is considered the world’s primary killer language, but many others (such as Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, French, Hindi, Swedish, and Hausa) function as killer languages in relation to smaller or less powerful languages and cultures. There is a nested hierarchy of languages and glottophagy in their spoken region.”

That Hausa is a killer language in relation to all the other languages sampled (including Igbo and Yoruba) can be seen in that only 3 respondents in the group of those with post basic education have Hausa as their ethnic or mother tongue and only 5 in the group with little formal education had Hausa as their mother tongue. Yet 67.3% of those with post basic education understood Hausa; 75.0% in this group could speak it, 46.2% could read it, and 35.6% could also write it. This is in sharp contrast to their mother tongues. In the



same vein, 79.4% of those with only basic or no formal education understood Hausa; 90.7% could speak it, 66.0% could read it, and 58.8% could write it too. A contributing factor could be the place of upbringing of the respondents, as 40.4% of the respondents in the group with post basic education were brought up in Jos and 5.8% in Kaduna. Similarly, 41.2% of those with only basic education were brought up in Jos, and 6.2% in Kaduna. Even so, only 13.5% of Igbo respondents in the group with post basic education could speak their mother tongue and only 7.7% of Yoruba respondents in this group could speak their mother tongue. Less than 10% of Beroms could speak their mother tongue. A similar survey conducted among the older generation may yield a different result.

### **The Health of Nigerian Languages**

What do these figures tell us about the health of most Nigerian languages (apart from Hausa)? To answer this question, we need to understand such concepts as “endangered languages” and the process of language death. So, the question is: What happens to a language as it dies? McWhorter (2001) provides the answer in the following words:

Generally, the last generation of fluent speakers has learned it only partly, never truly living in the language, using it only in the corners of their lives. As a result, the language is slightly pidginized. However, whereas in many cases a pidgin has been a temporary “setback” on the way to its expansion into a new language, the moribund variety of a dying language is a step along the way to permanent demise (262).

From our data, many speakers of the various ethnic tongues within the age range of 16-35 years lacked fluency. Many had to code-mix in order to communicate at all. For example, if the speaker’s mother tongue was Igbo, and he tried to speak it, you heard something like

*Nnaa, kedu maka your lectures yesterday?*

[Hi, how were your lectures yesterday?]

Or if Yoruba was the mother tongue, you heard something like

*Mo fe use your pressing iron ni o!*

[I would like to use your pressing iron (ni o! is a functional completive)]



Our data shows that even for this pidginized form of the language, only 17.3% could read it, and those that could write it were just 10.6%.

### **The Social Consequences of Language Loss**

The loss of a language includes the loss of a people's heritage, their culture, and it takes away an important part of a nation's history. As the language declines, so do the cultural mores of the people who speak it. For example, in Tiv, a language spoken in the Middle Belt of Nigeria, the word *cihi* (a synonym is *laha*) is culture-bound, and defies any accurate translation. It is close to "disrespect" but is not merely disrespect, as the English word may equally apply whether one of the parties involved is younger or not. In other words in English, an older person may show disrespect to someone younger, but the Tiv *cihi/ilyaha* refers only to the younger person showing such disrespect to the older. If the reverse is the case (i.e. when the offense is from an older person) it is no longer *cihi/ilyaha*, as the older cannot *cihi* someone younger than himself. Instead, it is *hii* (literally 'to cause offence'). But these days you hear young ones referring to people over twenty years older than themselves as *cihin* or *lahan*, when they *hii* them.

The old tradition was to teach in songs the names of many trees and shrubs common in Tiv flora. One popular song was called *fa ikyon ati* (know the names of trees).

*Fa ikyon ati gbaaye jiaaba kuee-e irkwar norom akinde akaande yiase, vambe ngura-oo kwerkwe-oo amako.*

(*gbaaye, jiaaba, kuee, irkwar, norom, akinde, akaande* [singular form is *ikyaande*] *yiase, vambe, ngura-oo* [a demonstrative=*vambe* there], *kwerkwe-oo, amako*. These are names of trees and shrubs) and we were taught while on our way to, from, or in the farm, to identify some of these trees. Today, the majority of Tiv within the age bracket of 18 to 25 know little of these names. The loss of these names means the inability to identify their referents and consequently means the loss of an important aspect of the Tiv traditional medicine as well as Tiv culinary.

Several literary features of Tiv and other minority languages in this study are fast disappearing; chiefly tongue twisters and proverbs. Such tongue twisters not only bring out the beauty of the language, but also captures the traditional homestead, as well as important aspects of traditional hunting and other practices. Following is a typical Tiv tongue twister:



Korough kù kù lù ken kungur kura kùrùkù ngù ken kù-ù?

[is there moth in the horn [stuck in the rafter] at the back of the hut?]

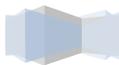
Een, korough kù kù lù ken kungur kura kùrùkù ngù ken kù

[Yes, there is moth in the horn [stuck in the rafter] at the back of the hut]

### **Why It Matters**

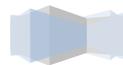
Cummins (2000) advances six reasons to show the importance of bilingual children's mother tongue for their overall personal and educational development.

- Bilingualism has positive effects on children's linguistic and educational development. When children continue to develop their abilities in two or more languages throughout their primary school years, they gain a deeper understanding of language and how to use it effectively. They have more practice in processing language, especially when they develop literacy in both, and they are able to compare and contrast the ways in which their two languages organize reality.
- The level of development of children's mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development. Children who come to school with a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in the school language. When parents and other caregivers (e.g. grandparents) are able to spend time with their children and tell stories or discuss issues with them in a way that develops their mother tongue vocabulary and concepts, children come to school well-prepared to learn the school language and succeed educationally. Children's knowledge and skills transfer across languages from the mother tongue they have learned in the home to the school language. From the point of view of children's development of concepts and thinking skills, the two languages are interdependent. Transfer across languages can be two-way: when the mother tongue is promoted in school (e.g. in a bilingual education program), the concepts, language, and literacy skills that children are learning in the majority language can transfer to the home language. In short, both languages nurture each other when the educational environment permits children access to both



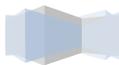
languages. Dalby (2002) agrees, stating: "Schooling in the mother tongue gives children a quicker start" (125).

- Mother tongue promotion in the school helps develop not only the mother tongue but also children's abilities in the majority school language. This finding is not surprising in view of the previous findings that (a) bilingualism confers linguistic advantages on children and (b) abilities in the two languages are significantly related or interdependent. Bilingual children perform better in school when the school effectively teaches the mother tongue and, where appropriate, develops literacy in that language. By contrast, when children are encouraged to reject their mother tongue and, consequently, its development stagnates, their personal and conceptual foundation for learning is undermined.
- Spending instructional time through a minority language in the school does not hurt children's academic development in the majority school language. Some educators and parents are suspicious of bilingual education or mother tongue teaching programs because they worry that these programs take time away from the majority school language. One of the most strongly established findings of educational research, conducted in many countries around the world, is that well-implemented bilingual programs can promote literacy and subject matter knowledge in a minority language without any negative effects on children's development in the majority language. (see Cummins, 2000, pp. 218-219). When children are learning through a minority language (e.g. their home language), they are not only learning this language in a narrow sense. They are learning concepts and intellectual skills that are equally relevant to their ability to function in the majority language. Pupils who know how to tell the time in their mother tongue understand the concept of telling time. In order to tell time in the second language (e.g. the majority language), they do not need to re-learn the concept of telling time; they simply need to acquire new labels or "surface structures" for an intellectual skill they have already learned. Similarly, at more advanced stages, there is transfer across languages in academic and literacy skills such as knowing how to distinguish the main idea from the supporting details of a written passage or story, identifying cause and effect, distinguishing



fact from opinion, and mapping out the sequence of events in a story or historical account.

- Children's mother tongues are fragile and easily lost in the early years of school. Many people marvel at how quickly bilingual children seem to "pick up" conversational skills in the majority language in the early years at school (although it takes much longer for them to catch up to native speakers in academic language skills). However, educators are often much less aware about how quickly children can lose their ability to use their mother tongues, even in the home context. The extent and rapidity of language loss will vary according to the concentration of families from a particular linguistic group in the school and neighbourhood. Where the mother tongue is used extensively in the community outside the school, then language loss among young children will be less. However, where language communities are not concentrated or "ghettoized" in particular neighbourhoods, children can lose their ability to communicate in their mother tongue within 2-3 years of starting school. They may retain receptive (understanding) skills in the language but they will use the majority language in speaking with their peers and siblings and in responding to their parents. By the time children become adolescents, the linguistic gap between parents and children has become an emotional chasm. Pupils frequently become alienated from the cultures of both home and school with predictable results.
- To reject a child's language in the school is to reject the child. When the message, implicit or explicit, communicated to children in the school is "Leave your language and culture at the schoolhouse door", children also leave a central part of who they are-their identities-at the schoolhouse door. When they feel this rejection, they are much less likely to participate actively and confidently in classroom instruction. It is not enough for teachers to passively accept children's linguistic and cultural diversity in the school. They must be proactive and take the initiative to affirm children's linguistic identity by having posters in the various languages of the community around the school, encouraging children to write in their mother tongues in addition to the majority school language (e.g. write and publish pupil-authored bilingual books), and generally



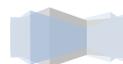
create an instructional climate where the linguistic and cultural experience of the whole child is actively accepted and validated.

### **The Way Forward**

What can policy makers, politicians, and the rest of us do to preserve, protect and transform Nigerian languages for posterity? First, each of us must consider speaking the mother tongue to their children, not only to their spouses and other older folk. One day, I was warning my 22 month-old daughter in English to stop what she was doing. As she persisted, I asked her, again in English, “don’t you understand English? Do you want me to say it in your mother tongue?” And the girl, on hearing “mother” replied, “yes, say it to my mother.” Of course, she did not get what I meant, but it dawned on me, as it must now dawn on all of us, that we usually speak our mother tongues only to our spouses, and English to our children. Cummins (2000) gives the following advice: “To reduce the extent of language loss, parents should establish a strong home language policy and provide ample opportunities for children to expand the functions for which they use the mother tongue (e.g. reading and writing) and the contexts in which they can use it (e.g. community mother tongue day care or play groups, visits to the country of origin, etc.)”. Dalby (2002) describes what actually takes place in many homes around the world:

In almost every country, in increasing numbers, parents who are able to make the choice are no longer teaching minority languages to their children. Young people of school age are learning national and international languages and practicing them with enthusiasm. . . . As a result, the number of speakers of the national languages of the world (fewer than 120 out of the 5,000) is swelling year by year. Not many minority languages will still be spoken in the twenty-second century (1x).

Second, teachers can also help children retain and develop their mother tongues by communicating to them strong affirmative messages about the value of knowing additional languages and the fact that bilingualism is an important linguistic and intellectual accomplishment. For example, they can initiate classroom projects focused on (a) developing children's language awareness (e.g. surveying and celebrating the multilingualism of students in the class) and (b) the sharing of languages in the class (e.g. every day a child

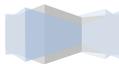


brings one significant word from the home language into class and the entire class, including the teacher, learns and discusses this word.

Finally, politicians must stop whipping up ethnic sentiments to advance their course. Instead, they should re-channel their consanguineous love, if they truly have it, to the development of their mother tongues. For example, the languages of the Niger-Delta are among the least developed in the country. The Ijaw group has about 14 disparate dialects, among these only Kolokuma has some form of stable orthography, and very little literature. Abuan, Gokana, Khana, Tai and other Ogoni languages share the same fate. As has been suggested by scholars (Okedera and Okedera, 1992; Cummings, 2000), developing mother tongue literacy will among other things, improve the overall literacy level of the citizenry, and thus improve productivity.

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